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ABSTRACT

Children's perceptions and attitudes about racial groups are often affected by the information they receive from the view of their parents, their peers, their schools, and the mass media. A study was designed to examine the effects of positive portrayals of black television characters on black children's racial attitudes, self-perception, and racial identification. Data were collected from black children (N=60) attending 1st and 2nd grades. Children were exposed to one of three experimental treatments. The effects of television programs on racial attitudes, self-perception, and racial identification varied by the sex of the child. There was some support for the expected positive attitudes to blacks for males who watched positive portrayals of black characters. Children exposed to same-sex black television characters showed an increase in self-perception. Boys expressed higher racial identification than girls did when exposed to positive portrayals of black characters on television. (Contains 30 references.) (JDM)

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The Effects of Positive Portrayals of Black Television Characters on Black Children's Racial Attitudes, Self-Perception, and Racial Identification

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Abstract

Children's perceptions of, and attitudes about racial groups and themselves are often affected by the information conveyed to them by the views of parents, peers, school, and the mass media. The purpose of the present study was to examine the effects of positive portrayals of Black television characters on Black children's racial attitudes, self-perception, and racial identification. Data were obtained from 60 Black children in first and second grades who were administered measures assessing racial attitudes, self-perception, and racial identification. Children were exposed to one of three experimental treatments. Two different episodes of Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids formed the two prosocial portrayals of Black characters. The control group watched a program with no Black characters.

The effects of TV programs on racial attitudes, self-perception, and racial identification varied by sex of child. There was some support for the expected positive attitudes to Blacks for males who watched positive portrayals of Black characters; less for females. Children exposed to same-sex Black television characters showed an increase in self-perception. Moreover, boys expressed higher racial identification after being exposed to positive portrayals of Black characters on television than girls.

The Effects of Positive Portrayals of Black Television Characters on Black Children's Racial Attitudes, Self-Perception and Racial Identification

Television is a pervasive presence during childhood in American society. Children seek entertainment from television, but they also use it for learning. Although children learn in a variety of ways, most social scientists agree that young people learn a great deal by imitating models provided in their environment (Bandura, 1962, 1965b, 1969; Nicholas, McCarter, & Heckel, 1971a, 1971b). One kind of observational learning occurs when a child watches television. Television portrayals offer children the opportunity to learn social behaviors from role models. Television communicates to the young information about social structure, and thus leads them to fashion attitudes and behaviors about themselves, others, and the world at large. Children also learn symbolic lessons about social structure of occupations, racial groups, gender, and violence by watching television.

Television has an impact on the views, values, attitudes, and behaviors of children (Leifer, Gordon, & Graves, 1974). Several studies have shown how television affects adults and children's attitudes and behaviors toward others as well as toward themselves and their racial group (Bogatz & Ball, 1971; Charters, 1933; Dorr, Rabin, Kovaric, Doubleday, & Brannon, (in press); Fujioka, 1999; Goldberg & Gorn, 1979; Graves, 1975, 1980; Peterson & Thurston, 1933).

While it is important to study the impact that television has on society in general, the results of some studies suggest a particular need to focus on the

effects of television on minorities (Asians, Black Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans). Numerous studies indicate that Blacks watch more television than do their White counterparts, and that they consider television a trusted and reliable source of information (Atkin, Greenberg, & McDermott, 1977; Greenberg, 1972; Greenberg & Dominick, 1969; Roberts & Bachen, 1981). The stereotypical representations of Black characters on television may have special significance to Black youngsters. Hence, it may be especially important for the development and socialization of Black children.

Television seems to be particularly important in the lives of Black Americans. Black viewers seem to be especially reliant on the information conveyed on television. Black American adults were reported to use the media as sources of information about the Black community, other Blacks, and the world (Allen & Bielby, 1979; Comstock & Cobbey, 1979, 1982; Shoskeck, 1969; Staples & Jones, 1985). Black Americans are apt to perceive television programs as reflecting reality; and they often use television to learn about social relationships and behaviors (Atkin, Greenberg, & McDermott, 1977; Greenberg, 1986).

Considerable evidence shows that Blacks tend to prefer and identify with programs featuring Black characters. Thus, the development of the racial and self attitudes in young Black children over time has been a concern of many. Children's awareness of their individual existence and the perceptions of who and what they are result from the interaction with their environments and how

significant others in this domain view them and the groups of which they are a member.

Historically, studies on ethnic representation and portrayals have suggested that television may have effects on the racial attitudes, self-perception, and racial identification of Black children, particularly negative images (Barnes, 1980; Clark, 1972; Tan & Tan, 1979). Others suggest that the increased presence of Black characters on television may lead to enhanced group attitudes, self-perception, and racial identification (Graves, 1975; Powell, 1982).

Recent proliferation of images by and about Blacks warrants investigation about how Black children feel about themselves and their racial group. The introduction of new programs featuring Blacks, such as the Hughleys, the Jamie Foxx Show, the Steve Harvey Show, the Parkers, and Girlfriends as well as the images of Blacks portrayed by BET, MTV, print media and the news endorses revisiting the effects of media portrayal, particularly television on Black children's attitudes and identity.

The present study is based on the hypothesis that television has an effect on Black children's racial attitudes, self-perception, and racial identification. Its specific purpose is to study the effects of positive portrayals of Black television characters on Black children's racial attitudes, self-perception, and racial identification.

Method

Subjects

The subjects in this study were 60 Black children in first and second grades (31 male and 29 female). These children attended a racially homogeneous school in a metropolitan area and lived in racially segregated neighborhoods.

Design and Procedure

The children were assigned to one of three experimental treatments. In two of the treatments, they viewed one of two programs showing prosocial portrayals of Black cartoon characters. In both stories, the central characters were Fat Albert and a group of 8 boys. In each story the main character, either a boy or girl, was experiencing some type of problem. In Program 1, that character was a boy (Dennis) who was a developmentally slow male being mainstreamed in a regular class. In Program 2, that character was a girl (Flora) who was adjusting to her parents' divorce. All characters were Black. In each story, Fat Albert and the group of boys begin by reacting negatively to the character with the problem, but they came to understand and to be helpful and supportive. The third condition was a non-prosocial program that featured no Black characters entitled "Life Is A Circus, Charlie Brown".

The children in the study were given measures of children's feelings toward their group and toward themselves. The Preschool Racial Attitude Measurement (PRAM II) developed by Williams (1971) was adapted and modified for this study. The adapted PRAM II incorporated positive and negative

evaluative adjectives with color drawings of Black and White children. There were 36 items evenly divided between two equivalent forms suitable for pretest and posttest administration. Of the 36 items, 24 were scored for racial attitudes and the remaining 12 were filler items that could be scored for gender choices. Each racial attitude item consisted of a brief story about a group of children which exemplified an adjective. It was accompanied by four drawings: two Black children and two White children of the same sex. For each item children were asked to select any number of the pictured children (0 to 4) who fit the description in the story. This allowed the child to select representatives of none of the racial groups, only one racial group, or representatives from both groups. Thus, the child was not forced to stereotype racially on any item.

The Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance for First-Second Grades was designed by Harter and Pike (1984). This measure contains four separate subscales: Cognitive Competence, Physical Competence, Peer Acceptance, and Maternal Acceptance. Each of the four subscales were composed of six items, constituting a total of 24 items. The items were presented with accompanying pictures. For each item, the subject was read a brief statement about two children who were shown in an accompanying picture. The pictures were black and white line drawings of children who generally had Caucasian features. The child was asked to pick the child who was most like him or her, and then to indicate, by pointing to the appropriate circle, whether the child is a lot like him or her (the big circle) or just a little like him or her (the smaller circle).

The Racial Identification measure was developed by Sesame Street Research (1992). The measure consists of eight items designed to assess racial self-awareness and one item assessing self-worth. Responses were collected on a 5-point Likert-type scale in which faces ranging from very happy to very sad were used to denote the points on the scale. Children were asked to point to the facial picture that expressed how they felt.

Prior to viewing the videotape, the child was administered the pretest PRAM II. Once the measure was completed, the child viewed one of three tapes. After viewing the tape, the child was administered the measures in the following order: (1) the perceived competence and social acceptance, (2) posttest PRAM II, and (3) the racial identification measure.

Results

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of positive portrayals of Black television characters on Black children's racial attitudes, self-perceptions, and racial identification.

Effects of Treatment Conditions on Racial Attitudes.

To test the hypothesis that exposure to prosocial Black cartoon characters lead to an increase in positive group attitudes, MANOVAs were performed. These MANOVAs were performed separately on the positive and negative adjectives in the racial attitude measure.

Positive Adjectives. There were no significant main effect or interaction with condition. However, a significant interaction of prepost by sex of character was identified, $F(2, 54) = 217.63$, $p < .00$. In addition, a significant interaction of sex of character x race of character was identified, $F(2, 54) = 5.46$, $p < .02$. A borderline three-way interaction (sex of subject x race of character x prepost) was identified, $F(2, 54) = 3.67$, $p < .06$.

Children showed a decreased in positive scores for boy characters and an increase in positive scores for girl characters after viewing television. Positive scores for White boy characters decreased more than for Black boy characters. The means are shown in Table 1.

The results revealed no significant interaction with condition. However, there were differences found with interaction of condition x sex of subject. Boys' positive attitudes to Blacks (relative to Whites) were higher after the two

prosocial conditions than after the control treatment. Girls showed no particular condition difference for positive attitudes. (see Table 2).

Negative Adjectives. There were no significant main effects with condition. However, there was a significant four-way interaction of condition x sex of subject x prepost x race of character, $F(2, 54) = 3.26$, $p < .05$. Also, a three-way interaction (sex of character x race of character x prepost) was identified, $F(2, 54) = 6.34$, $p < .02$. In addition, significant interactions for prepost by sex of character, $F(2, 54) = 325.46$, $p < .00$), prepost by race of character, $F(2,54) = 4.50$, $p < .04$, and sex of character x race of character, $F(2, 54) = 14.04$, $p < .00$ were identified.

The results shown in Table 3 suggest that boys who saw Program 2 or the Control tape showed reduced negative attitudes about Blacks and increased negative attitudes about Whites. Boys in Program 1 showed an increase in negative attitudes about Blacks and a small decrease in negative attitudes about Whites.

The means shown in Table 3 for the total sample demonstrated a decrease in the negative scores of Black characters on the posttest scale. Negative scores for White characters demonstrated a pattern of change. Children showed an increase in negative scores of White characters in all conditions on the posttest scale.

The interaction of sex of character x race of character analyses are presented in Table 4. Children chose characters based on the sex and race of the character regardless of television treatment. Thus, children increased selection of

boys for negative adjectives, regardless of race. Pretest scores were especially high for Black girls, but declined at posttest. Scores for White girls also declined.

Self-Perception of Competence. To test the second part of the hypothesis that prosocial viewing of Black television characters increases self-perception, two multivariate analyses were performed -- one on the total score and one on the four subscales of the self-perception measurement. There was no overall effect of prosocial television on the total score of self-perception. However, a significant interaction was found for sex of subject x condition, $F(2, 54) = 4.60$, $p < .01$. Males and females tended to demonstrate higher self-perception after watching same-sex characters as recipients of prosocial actions on television than after prosocial programs with recipients of the other sex (see Table 5).

Racial Identification. A mulitivariate analysis was performed to determine if prosocial viewing increased racial identification. Exposure to prosocial television did not increase racial identification, $F(2,54) = .20$, $p < .82$ (see Table 6). The results demonstrated differences between males and females in response to prosocial viewing. However, these differences were not significant, $F(1, 54) = 2.37$, $p < .13$. Although the means suggested differences between males and females in response in prosocial viewing, the sex x condition interaction was not significant. Males exposed to prosocial Black television characters had slightly higher racial identification than those in the control treatment. Females demonstrated the reverse pattern.

Discussion

The main goal of this study was to determine the effects of positive portrayals of Black television characters on Black children's racial attitudes, self-perceptions, and racial identification.

Children who were exposed to prosocial Black television characters were expected to show an increase in positive attitudes to Blacks, compared to children who had no exposure to Black television characters. This hypothesis received partial support. As predicted, Black children who watched positive portrayals of Black characters showed an increase in positive attitudes to Blacks. However, this increase in positive attitudes to Blacks was also shown among children who were not exposed to prosocial Black television characters. It is possible that the increase in positive attitudes to Black characters, regardless of condition, is due to the presence of positive portrayal which contrasts with exclusion of Blacks on television. Black children showed the greatest increase in positive attitudes toward their racial group when Blacks on television were observed portraying positive behavior. Although the children who received no television exposure to Black characters showed an increase in positive attitudes to Black characters, the overall level of increase was low. One way of interpreting the slight increase is that the exclusion of Blacks on television may not lower Black children's attitudes toward their group. Thus the increase in positive attitudes in the no exposure group could be because Black children were not exposed to negative portrayals of Black television characters. Therefore, it is possible that television has its greatest

effect on Black children's group attitudes when Blacks on television are negatively portrayed.

The effects of TV programs on all three measures varied by sex of child. On the whole, there was some support for the expected positive effects of prosocial programs for boys; less so for girls. Boys showed an increase in positive attitudes in response to both prosocial programs and a decrease in negative attitudes after Program 2. On the other hand, girls showed no particular condition differences for positive attitudes and an increase in negative attitudes after both prosocial programs, especially Program 2.

Programs featuring positive portrayals of Black television characters were expected to have a positive effect on Black children's self-perceptions and racial identification. As predicted, subjects being exposed to prosocial Black television characters did show slightly higher levels of self-perception than the control group. However, the analysis revealed this increase in self-perception was observed only among viewers who were exposed to same-sex Black television characters. Boys expressed higher self-perceptions after Program 1 and girls expressed high self-perceptions after Program 2.

Positive portrayals of Black television characters produced different patterns of racial identification for boys and girls. Boys expressed higher racial identification after Prosocial 1 than after the control. Girls expressed low racial identification after prosocial programs.

On all three measures, the prosocial programs seemed to have more effects

on boys than on girls. Why are boys affected more than girls? The protagonist and the group of helpers in these programs were all male, so boys may have felt more affinity with them than girls did. In prosocial 1, the person being helped was also male; in prosocial 2, the person being helped was female. It is possible that children applied the messages of the program to themselves more when the central character was the same gender than when they were the other gender.

These findings suggest that gender should be taken into account when considering the effects of minority TV portrayals on children. It seems that Black television characters may impact the development and socialization of Black males more than Black females.

The findings of this study have implications for research on negative or stereotypical portrayals of Black television characters on Black and White children's racial attitudes, as well as for investigating gender differences. Since this study only focused on the presence and absence of prosocial Black television characters it would seem important to study the effects of negative portrayals as well. In Graves' (1975) study of Black children, she found that Black characters produced positive racial attitudes in Black children regardless of type of portrayal (positive or negative). The results from the current study demonstrated that no exposure to prosocial Black television characters increase positive adjectives and decrease negative adjectives of Black characters. Therefore, it would be meaningful to examine the effects of positive and negative portrayals and the exclusion of Black television characters on Black and White children's racial

attitudes.

Findings from this study also have implications for examining differences between males and females in their perceptions of individuals, such as gender stereotypes. It is possible from the current data that Black children rely more upon their perceptions of gender differences than race differences to decide upon positive and negative characteristics.

Another area of focus is the effects of television portrayals on other minority groups. There is relatively little information about how television is used by other ethnic minorities, such as Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans. Also, research needs to examine the effects of television as well as the effects of minority television characters on other ethnic minorities, such as Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans.

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Table 1

Total Sample Means and Standard Deviations of Positive Adjectives by Sex of Character

	N	Black Boy MEAN (SD)	White Boy MEAN (SD)	Black Girl MEAN (SD)	White Girl MEAN (SD)
Pretest	60	3.333 (1.919)	3.200 (2.039)	1.600 (1.238)	1.900 (1.189)
Posttest	60	2.117 (1.209)	1.367 (1.340)	3.617 (2.330)	3.867 (2.288)

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Positive Adjectives for Black and White Characters

		Black Characters				White Characters			
		Pretest		Posttest		Pretest		Posttest	
Groups	N	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD
Program 1									
Male	10	**4.600**	2.951	**6.000**	5.055	**6.100**	4.122	**5.400**	4.071
Female	10	**4.200**	2.044	**4.700**	3.561	**3.800**	3.259	**4.800**	3.084
Program 2									
Male	11	**4.909**	1.578	**6.545**	2.806	**4.182**	2.483	**3.909**	3.208
Female	9	**5.667**	2.739	**5.778**	2.635	**6.000**	2.646	**6.000**	2.915
Control									
Male	10	**5.500**	3.100	**6.000**	3.742	**5.900**	2.283	**5.800**	2.741
Female	10	**4.800**	2.974	**5.300**	3.234	**5.300**	2.830	**5.700**	3.057
For entire sample	59	**4.933**	2.549	**5.733**	3.118	**5.183**	3.011	**5.233**	3.285

Note. Each cell mean had a possible range of 0 to 12.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations of Negative Adjectives for Black and White Characters

		Black Characters				White Characters			
		Pretest		Posttest		Pretest		Posttest	
Groups	N	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD
Program 1									
Male	10	**4.700**	3.683	**5.200**	3.155	**3.700**	3.164	**3.600**	2.271
Female	10	**4.500**	1.434	**4.400**	3.062	**2.900**	1.370	**3.400**	1.265
Program 2									
Male	11	**4.727**	2.573	**3.636**	2.111	**3.545**	1.916	**5.455**	3.012
Female	8	**4.875**	2.532	**5.500**	1.927	**4.375**	.916	**4.500**	2.390
Control									
Male	10	**7.000**	2.449	**6.600**	2.633	**3.900**	2.923	**4.200**	2.658
Female	10	**5.600**	2.503	**5.200**	2.741	**2.400**	1.506	**5.000**	2.828
For entire sample	59	**5.237**	2.648	**5.051**	2.713	**3.441**	2.160	**4.373**	2.491

Note. Each cell mean had a possible range of 0 to 12.

Table 4

Total Sample Means and Standard Deviations of Negative Adjectives by Sex of Character

	N	Black Boy MEAN (SD)	White Boy MEAN (SD)	Black Girl MEAN (SD)	White Girl MEAN (SD)
Pretest	59	1.542 (1.119)	1.475 (1.104)	3.695 (1.859)	1.966 (1.508)
Posttest	59	3.356 (2.107)	3.220 (1.948)	1.695 (.987)	1.153 (.979)

Table 5

Means and Standard Deviations of Self-Perception

Groups	N	MEAN	SD
Male Subjects			
Prosocial 1	10	13.118	1.268
Prosocial 2	11	12.302	2.250
Control	10	12.998	1.742
Female Subjects			
Prosocial 1	10	12.149	1.333
Prosocial 2	9	14.409	1.186
Control	10	13.616	1.438

Table 6

Means and Standard Deviations of Racial Identification

Groups	N	MEAN	SD
Male Subjects			
Prosocial 1	10	18.900	8.359
Prosocial 2	11	17.545	5.646
Control	10	17.100	5.466
Female Subjects			
Prosocial 1	10	19.100	4.748
Prosocial 2	9	19.333	6.403
Control	10	22.100	3.281